

# Directed by Homer: the *Iliad* and the poetry of seeing

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Many films have been inspired by Homer's *Iliad*, most recently Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*. Quite apart from the plot and the characters of Achilles and Hector, there is another important way in which Homer's *Iliad* might be said to have 'inspired' attempts to film the story of the Trojan War: the emphasis Homer places on giving us the impression that we are seeing what happens at Troy during a short period in the final year of the war.

This might seem like a paradox – after all, Homer characterizes his own position in relation to the Muses as being one of an inferior listener who does not have first-hand knowledge of the events and characters at Troy. Nevertheless, he uses what he hears from the Muses and the manner in which he tells this to his audience to create the impression that we are almost 'eye-witnesses' of the action at Troy. The ways in which Homer achieves this more often resemble cinematic techniques rather than reminding us of pictures or paintings, and thinking about the epic in terms of film may help us understand more clearly how Homer achieves his effects.

## Bird's-eye view

When, for example, Homer describes the battlefield, he often does so from the perspective of someone looking down on it from above:

*Retiring*  
*peaks apart from the other gods, he [i.e. Zeus] sat aloof,*  
*glorying in his power, gazing out over*  
*the city walls of Troy and the warships of Achaea,*  
*the flash of bronze, fighters killing, fighters killed ...*  
*As long as morning rose and the blessed day grew*  
*stronger,*  
*the weapons hurtled side-to-side and men kept falling.*  
(*Iliad* 11.80–5, Robert Fagles' translation)

This point of view is sometimes called the 'bird's-eye view', and here we are almost seeing what Zeus himself sees from his vantage point on Olympus. There is a cinematic feel to this distant overview of the action, as there is when Homer 'focuses in' from this bird's-eye view to pick out one particular hero:

*– just at the height of morning*  
*the Argives smashed battalions, their courage breaking*  
*through*  
*and they shouted ranks of cohorts on along the lines.*  
*And right in their midst sprang Agamemnon first*  
*and killed a fighter, Bienor, veteran captain,*  
*then his aide Oileus lashing on their team.*  
*Down from his car he'd leapt, squaring off,*  
*charging in full fury, full face, straight*  
*into Agamemnon's spearhead ramming sharp ...*  
(*Iliad* 11.90–6)

In this way we move from the mass of fighting into one individual encounter between heroes, and then the rest of Agamemnon's sustained killing spree. This is reminiscent of 'wide-angle' or panoramic shots which film a large area and then zoom into one particular part of this large area.

## Continuous shots

Homer can also use what a character can see in another way, to change from one scene to another (that is to say, to move from location on the battlefield to another), as when we move from Diomedes' success in battle to a distant enemy when the Trojan archer Pandarus spots him:

*... so under Tydides' force the Trojan columns panicked*  
*now,*  
*no standing their ground, massed, packed as they were.*  
*But the shining archer Pandarus marked him storming*  
*down the plain, smashing the Trojan lines before him.*  
*Quickly he trained his reflex bow on Diomedes*  
*charging straight ahead – he shot!*

(*Iliad* 5.93–7)

Again, what Homer describes is almost what Pandarus himself can see, that is Diomedes on his destructive charge across the battlefield.

In fact Homer in the *Iliad* generally seems to try to avoid what we might call (to use cinematic terms once more) 'cuts', where the shot of one scene ends and is immediately followed by a different shot of another scene. Instead Homer by and large connects up the scenes in the *Iliad*, e.g. by moving around the battlefield using what his characters can see (or where they go). It's as if he never switches off the camera but uses one continuous shot: as one scholar has put it, there are 'very few breaks in the filming' in the *Iliad*. This 'continuous shot' technique is, in fact, rarely used in films on a scale comparable with that we find in the *Iliad*: long, unbroken shots of this kind tend to stand out and attract praise as pieces of unusual virtuosity, such as the unbroken opening shot, lasting eight minutes or so, of Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992). Nevertheless Homer's avoidance of 'cuts' gives us an idea of how he creates the impression that we are 'seeing' the events on the plain of Troy.

## A view to a kill

Homer also lets us 'see' things which we normally cannot see, or that we could not see, even if we had been in Troy itself watching the fighting, such as the precise nature of some of the wounds which the heroes receive, or of the progress of spears through shields:

*Closing, Meges gave him some close attention too –*  
*the famous spearman struck behind his skull,*  
*just at the neck-cord, the razor spear slicing*  
*straight up through the jaws, cutting away the tongue –*  
*he sank in the dust, teeth clenching the cold bronze.*  
(*Iliad* 5.72–5)

Even the other fighters on the battlefield could not know precisely where the point of a spear which had pierced body or shield would end up, or exactly what damage this might have caused. Here too there is a cinematic parallel for this kind of privileged sight which Homer allows us: the 'go anywhere' camera used in some films to follow the progress of bullets through the air and into the body, even into the victim's internal organs, as

in *Three Kings*. In both its cinematic and Homeric varieties this technique gives the audience access to things which they (and the characters in the story) could not otherwise see.

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### No oil painting

I have characterized the *Iliad* as 'visual' in its presentation of the events at Troy, but it is important to note that long passages describing objects, people, or landscapes are relatively infrequent in Homer. This is one reason why it is film which provides the better parallel for the visual character of the *Iliad*, as opposed to still pictures or painting. Homer is not 'visual' in the sense that he tries carefully to map out the precise layout of his locations, such as the plain of Troy or the Greek ships, or give us a plan of their relative positions. These locations, in other words, function as 'background' to the action of the epic, much as many locations in films do: they are the setting for the story, but they are not its focus.

When Homer does describe the appearance of someone or something in detail, he does this for a particular purpose, as when he tells us of the peculiarly ugly Thersites in book 2 of the *Iliad*, which fits in well with the abusive language he directs at Agamemnon. Even the longest set-piece description of an object, the Shield of Achilles in book 18 of the *Iliad*, is full of movement and action (for example in the quarrel over blood-money which he depicts in vv. 497ff.). Homer (to use another parallel from the cinema) does not routinely 'zoom in' on objects or people and 'hold the shot', without moving the camera, for an extended period of time. Homer's vision is of a different, more active order.

### Shall I compare thee...?

The parts of the *Iliad* which we might at first glance think most resemble still pictures more than film are the many similes in the poem, in which Homer compares some aspect of his main story with a different area of human experience (usually from 'ordinary life' and often evoking peace rather than war). These too are 'visual' in their evocation of scenes from (for example) agricultural life:

*And the men like gangs of reapers slashing down  
the reaping-rows and coming closer, closer across  
the field of a warlord rich in wheat or barley –  
swaths by the armfuls falling thick-and-fast ...*

(*Iliad* 11.67–9)

Here too we can see Homer's interest in movement and activity, even in parts of the epic which are not straightforwardly moving the main story forward (and which we could then see as a kind of 'pause' in the story). But the story here has of course in one sense moved on: the simile above has conveyed the impression that the armies have closed in on one another, and the next line reads, 'so Achaeans and Trojans closed and slashed ...' (*Iliad* 11.70). To this extent many of the similes resemble parallel short films, or perhaps fragments of film, taken from a different world from the central plot of the *Iliad*, but also reflecting its action in their own forward movement.

Homer wasn't producing a film, of course, or writing a screenplay. But it does seem as if trying to make the audience feel as if they could visualize what happened at Troy was one important effect of the *Iliad*. Perhaps Homer's success in making us feel we can see (and not just hear about) Achilles, Patroclus, Hector, and the rest was one reason why Homer's *Iliad* survived complete, in contrast to many other ancient Greek epics about the Trojan War. It is certainly a striking demonstration of the power of Homer's story-telling to evoke the distant mythological past. It may also be part of the explanation for why many film-makers have felt the *Iliad* could be filmed.